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SUBJECT: BRYANSK: CASE STUDY OF A REGIONAL PARTY OF POWER

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Once a keystone of post-Soviet Communist control, the political scene in Bryansk region is now dominated by United Russia (YR). YR has attracted the youth, business, and elite vote - votes that used to be divided between the Communist Party and liberal parties like the Union of Right Forces (SPS). The Communist Party is hanging on as the opposition, but its electorate is growing old and losing faith in the party. SPS is increasingly marginalized and demoralized. End Summary

YR Consolidates Control Quickly Under Putin

¶2. (U) From 2000-2004, YR made a concerted effort to consolidate control in Bryansk. The region was one of only five in which Putin lost in the 2000 elections (it voted for Communist Gennadiy Zyuganov). Therefore, YR pulled out all the stops to consolidate control in the 2003 State Duma elections and the 2004 presidential and gubernatorial contest. As a result, Putin won the region by a considerable margin in 2004 and Nikolay Denin was elected State Duma deputy from the Bryansk single mandate district in 2003 and then governor of Bryansk region in December 2004.

¶3. (SBU) The 2004 gubernatorial election was one of the most infamous in Russia in its use of smear tactics and other manipulations of the system -- and YR administrative resources. A local court struck Denin's popular Communist opponent Yuriy Lodkin from the ballot in November 2004 in response to allegations that he violated election laws. Lodkin's supporters charged that the courts were being manipulated to pave the way for Denin. In the first round of elections, "against all" came in second with 21 percent, behind Denin with 43 percent, in a clear protest against Lodkin's exclusion from the ballot. In the second round, Denin got 78 percent of the vote compared with 10 percent for third place SPS candidate Yevgeniy Zelenko. "Against all" got 10.6 percent.

¶4. (SBU) In a November 1 meeting, Deputy Director of the Bryansk Regional Human Rights Association Sergey Kurdenko told us that Denin has been involved in other controversies. There have been allegations that he funnels government funds to his Snezhka chicken processing factory. Although he was involved in a car accident in which he ran over two women (one of whom died), the regional prosecutor general did not pursue the case. Denin does not enjoy a great deal of popular support in the region, but he has strong ties to the Kremlin, the State Duma, and the YR Central Committee. Individual YR regional deputies are more popular, mainly because they are young businesspeople who lobby for their local social and business interests.

YR Dominates All Branches of Power

15. (U) YR dominates all branches of executive and legislative power in the Bryansk region. The regional governor and mayor of Bryansk belong to YR. The party has majorities in both the regional Duma and Bryansk City Council. In contrast, until 2004 KPRF was the dominant force in the Duma. Now it has 12 seats in the 60-seat regional assembly, to YR's 35. Kurdenko noted that there were no forces in the region able to credibly oppose YR. In his view, YR is comparable to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but even stronger. 6. (U) YR clearly controls the legislative process in the regional Duma. The key issues are implementing national projects and getting Moscow to allocate more funds to the region. Maintaining federal support for Chernobyl survivor benefits and environmental programs also remains important. According to Communist Deputy Stepan Panasov, regional Duma deputies from all parties resent that the national budget is running at a record-high surplus, while the regional budget is deeply in the red.

YR Also Dominates the Media

17. (U) In 2005, Governor Denin named Anatoliy Terebunov acting deputy governor for media and regional affairs. Terebunov was previously the editor of the opposition paper "Bryanskiy Perekrestok." Soon after Terebunov's appointment, editors of the region's six state-supported newspapers were asked to submit their resignations. Terebunov and Denin did not bother to hide the political motives behind their pressure on the editors, saying in public that "the administration intends to cauterize them no matter how much they moan." Local RTR television journalist Andrey Anufrikov told us that "Bryanskiy Perekrostok" is now the "voice" of the administration, and that other media outlets do not stray far from the administration's line.

18. (U) Four years ago, the All-Russian Television and Radio Company
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(VGTRK) bought out all local TV and radio companies and 90 percent of the staff was fired. Now VGTRK has a virtual monopoly on TV and radio in Bryansk. The head of VGTRK in Bryansk belongs to YR and cooperates with Denin. Two private companies - Ren TV and TV Channel 60 - are represented in Bryansk, but Ren TV's audience is one-tenth of VTGRK's and the TV Channel 60 audience share is even smaller.

United Russia Attracting Youth Vote

19. (SBU) According to Vladimir Proyanenkov, Head of the Bryansk YR Executive Committee, YR has 35 branches in all 28 districts of Bryansk Oblast and about 8,500 members. Young people make up about thirty percent of the party. YR's electorate comes from both cities and rural districts, but its general level of education is higher than the region's average. YR has infiltrated former Communist strongholds in the rural districts by buying up businesses and taking over management of public institutions, and by encouraging employees to vote for YR in elections, according to our contacts.

110. (SBU) In a meeting with Emboffs, Proyanenkov mentioned that the local YR branch criticized the YR's new party program for lack of concrete goals and figures, and for not paying enough attention to professional education, demographic issues, and health care. Proyanenkov said that the YR faction closely cooperates with Rodina, SPS, and Social Democratic factions. The KPRF, he said, was the only real opposition in the regional Duma. Proyanenkov does not believe that the newly formed "For A Just Russia" party will threaten YR's dominance.

Previously Strong KPRF Losing Ground

111. (SBU) YR is gradually squeezing the KPRF's electorate, wooing many of its followers with promises of a better future and alleging that KPRF mismanagement during the 1990s is the source of the region's current economic problems. In a November 1 meeting,

Bryansk KPRF Executive Committee and KPRF regional Duma faction member Stepan Panasov told Emboffs there were 3,300 KPRF members in the region. The party's working class base was shrinking and its electorate now mainly comprised middle-aged members of the "intelligentsia" and veterans. He said young people are not joining the KPRF -- only five percent of the region's youth supports the party. The allegiance of the rural population has shifted to the local authorities, who are generally YR members.

SPS Struggling in Bryansk

¶12. (SBU) "Democratic" parties pose little threat to YR in the region, primarily due to leadership issues at the national level. Gennadiy Novikov, Executive Director of SPS Bryansk regional branch, told Emboffs that the Bryansk SPS branch has only 694 members, and funding difficulties restrict it to two employees and a one-room office. Per Novikov, the SPS central office pays little attention to regional branch needs. Novikov termed SPS Head Nikita Belykh a poor leader, and doubted that Belykh would be successful in the December Perm legislative by-elections. (Belykh is from Perm and is heading the SPS ticket there.)

¶13. (SBU) Novikov said the SPS electorate in Bryansk region included teachers, doctors, and students, although the latter were less likely to vote. With money the chief motivating factor for many of the region's youth, YR's complement of young businesspeople and aura of success make it a magnet for the region's young. Novikov contended that local YR deputies are the same faces and the same "thieves" who used to be KPRF deputies. He termed the Russian Party of Life a compliant party and believed that the new "For A Just Russia" party had little to offer.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) United Russia has eclipsed the Communist party and established itself as the clear party of power in Bryansk - for now.

As United Russia's rapid replacement of the Communist Party in a former red stronghold indicates, political fortunes can change quickly, however. While SPS and other established parties have failed to make inroads, the newly-formed "For AJust Russia" party may be in a better position to pose a challenge to YR in the region, if Kremlin support for it is backed by administrative resources. While Governor Denin has been a controversial figure, he continues to enjoy the Kremlin's favor and his position --for now-- appears secure.

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